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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses "Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994." The standards specify what students in U.S. schools should learn and be able to do with regard to geography. There are six essential elements of geography into which 18 standards are grouped: (1) the world in spatial terms; (2) places and regions; (3) physical systems; (4) human systems; (5) environment and society; and (6) the uses of geography. Five skill sets for geography are presented with the content standards. The skills are: (1) asking geographic questions; (2) acquiring geographic information; (3) organizing geographic information; (4) analyzing geographic information; and (5) answering geographic questions. The standards make it clear that geography skills are the means to access and address the content in the standards. The five skills and suggestions for their inclusion focus upon critical thinking and incorporate such processes as knowing, inferring, analyzing, judging, hypothesizing, generalizing, predicting, and decision making. While the skills are clearly identified, they must be integrated within the numerous content standard suggestions across the students' K-12 experiences. This Digest lists five reasons why geography standards should be used: (1) they reflect the scholarly contributions of geography to student learning in grades K-12; (2) constituent groups agree that the standards include what U.S. youth should know and be able to do in using geography; (3) they reduce geographic content to a manageable level; (4) they may be mixed and matched to provide for a content rich social studies; and (5) they will link all schools with common threads in the curriculum. Instructions for obtaining copies of the standards are included. Contains 13 references and ERIC resources. (DK)

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Joseph P. Stoltman

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The National Geography Content Standards

by Joseph P. Stoltman

Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994 is a major contribution to social studies and geographical education. It specifies what students in American schools should learn and be able to do with regard to geography. There are six essential elements of geography into which 18 standards are grouped.

Element 1: The World in Spatial Terms. Maps, photographs, and satellite images are principal tools for investigating the relationships between people, places, and environments. When information is shown using those tools, it is in a spatial context. The spatial context for geography is the Earth. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 1) How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective. (Standard 2) How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context. (Standard 3) How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface.

Element 2: Places and Regions. People are attached to particular places and regions. Regions and places have been given meaning by people, and in turn those places and regions help people to organize and understand the complex world. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 4) The physical and human characteristics of places. (Standard 5) That people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity. (Standard 6) How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.

Element 3: Physical Systems. The Earth is always changing. Many of the changes are the result of physical processes. Geography includes four types of physical processes that are important to understanding the Earth. The atmosphere (weather and climate), the lithosphere (plate tectonics, erosion), the hydrosphere (oceans, water cycle), and biosphere (ecosystems, vegetation) are the physical systems that shape and change the surface of the Earth. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 7) The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface. (Standard 8) The characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface.

Element 4: Human Systems. Human systems are in constant change on the Earth. People migrate, increase, decrease, or stabilize their numbers in different places, and learn ways of living that distinguish a group from other groups. Human systems are comprised primarily of population, culture, settlement, and the cooperation, conflicts, and relationships among those components. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 9) The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface. (Standard 10) The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics. (Standard 11) The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface. (Standard 12) The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement. (Standard 13) How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface.

Element 5: Environment and Society. Human history has witnessed many different instances of people interacting with the environment. People sometimes adjust their lives to fit the environmental conditions, while in other settings the natural environment has been greatly altered to meet the needs of people. Some societies have benefitted greatly from environmental resources and others have created environmental hazards and crises in the way the resources have been used. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 14) How human actions modify the physical environment. (Standard 15) How physical systems affect human systems. (Standard 16) The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources.

Element 6: The Uses of Geography. Geography provides a means to look at the past, present, and future. Events and issues, regardless of their past, present, or future nature, have a geographical context. The geographical context is important to explaining what happened and where, and what the consequences were or might be, both historically and geographically. The geographically informed person knows and understands: (Standard 17) How to apply geography to interpret the past. (Standard 18) How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future.

Developing Geographic Skills. Five skill sets for geography are presented with the content standards. The skills are (1) asking geographic questions; (2) acquiring

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geographic information; (3) organizing geographic information; (4) analyzing geographic information; and (5) answering geographic questions. This distinction between skills and content is important. The standards make it clear that geography skills are the means to access and address the content in the standards. The five skills and suggestions for their inclusion focus upon critical thinking and incorporate such processes as knowing, inferring, analyzing, judging, hypothesizing, generalizing, predicting, and decision making. While the skills are clearly identified, they must be integrated within the numerous content standard suggestions across the students' K-12 experiences.

Applying the Standards to Curriculum and Instruction. Across the K-12 range of curricula, a serious effort should be made to include content standards from geography at every grade level. There are several compelling reasons why geography standards should be used: (1) The standards reflect the scholarly contributions of geography to student learning in grades K-12. (2) There is considerable agreement among constituent groups that the standards include what young people in the United States should know and be able to do in using geography. (3) The universe of geographic content is reduced to a manageable level within the standards. (4) The standards may be mixed and matched in various scopes and sequences to provide for a content rich social studies. (5) The standards will link all schools that use them with common threads in the curriculum and will provide continuity in content selection for students who change residences and schools during their K-12 educational experience.

The true test of using a content standard from geography is its application with students in classrooms. They are inclusive of the five fundamental themes of geography that have been widely accepted and especially useful to teachers since 1984 (Joint Committee on Geographic Education). These themes are location, place, human/environment relationships, movement, and regions.

Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994 is available for $9.00 from the National Geographic Society, Post Office Box 1640, Washington, DC 20013-1640. Credit card holders may call 800/368-2728 to place an order.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2842; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1440 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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